

# A COMMUNITY REBORN

Residents of a Mount Vernon neighborhood hope  
a name change will help create a new image



Scott Threlk / Skagit Valley Herald  
The Arellano family stands in front of their home at La Paloma Apartments in northeast Mount Vernon. The family moved into the farmworker housing complex in 1992 and have lived there longer than any other residents. Pictured are (from left to right) Sonia, Jose, and their children Jose Jr., 9, and Vanessa, 14.

## Kulshan Creek neighborhood works to change its reputation

By FRANKY WHITE  
Staff Writer

**M**OUNT VERNON — Can a name change help a neighborhood kick its old reputation? The Skagit County Housing Authority hopes so.

The public agency is inviting the residents of La Paloma Apartments in northeastern Mount Vernon to create a new name for their home. The name La Paloma, meaning "the dove" in Spanish, originally represented the migrant farmworkers who lived there during the harvest season, but left by fall.

Today the authority contends La Paloma, which provides year-round housing for low-income residents who earn at least a portion of their income from farm labor, conjures up negative memories of the 40-unit complex's more seedy past.

"It really does have bad connotations," said Vicky Young, La Paloma's property manager. "We want to make a fresh start."

La Paloma, along with the four other apartment complexes and a trailer park that make up the Kulshan Creek neighborhood near Skagit Valley College, received a bad rep in the 1990s.

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Matt Wildlife / Skagit Valley Herald

The Mount Vernon Police Department worked with the Mount Vernon Noon Rotary club to erect this sign marking the North 26th Street entrance into the Kulshan Creek neighborhood. The hand-drawn logo is the design of a young resident.

### KULSHAN CREEK NEIGHBORHOOD FACTS

#### Boundaries

College Way, North LaVenture Road, Kulshan Avenue and just east of North 30th Street.

#### 2000 population

2,448 people. 65.6 percent are Hispanic.

#### Rental housing

Cascade West Apartments; Summergreen Apartments; Skagit Valley Mobile Manor; Brigadoon Apartments; La Paloma Apartments; Kulshan Apartments.

#### Source

2007 Kulshan Creek report by Mount Vernon Police Department.

# Kulshan: Residents say neighborhood a safe haven

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At La Paloma, junk cars littered the surrounding streets. Some of its residents would get drunk and fight. Sometimes disagreements ended with fistbats, and apartments were trashed. There were no porch infestations and floors had no cigarette butts that sometimes went through to the level below, said Lopez Soto, a farm labor housing specialist for the Housing Authority.

That was the situation in the early 1990s before county property records show the Housing Authority bought the complex from a local farmer in 1997.

"There was a lot of police activity for quite a few years," Young said.

"It didn't look that nice," acknowledged Soto.

But the Kulshan Creek neighborhood has changed, many say. Seventy-four percent of Kulshan Creek residents said they felt safe after dark during a 2006 neighborhood survey. Only 11 percent answered the same way in 1997, said Mount Vernon police officer Jon Gerondale.

Gerondale has been the Kulshan Creek neighborhood's community resource officer for five years. The police department responded to the area's criminal uprising by placing a neighborhood police station at the corner of Kulshan Avenue and North 26th Street in 1997.

The blue portable building, known as the Casa Azul — "Blue House" in Spanish — by area residents, has become a center of community activity. More than an office for Gerondale, the station is also home to an after-school study group for neighborhood children. Area adults also frequently visit the station for community meetings and to attend classes learn English or earn General Educational Development diplomas.

Gerondale, who has been with the Mount Vernon Police Department since 1995, has heard veterans officers talk about how Kulshan Creek used to be.

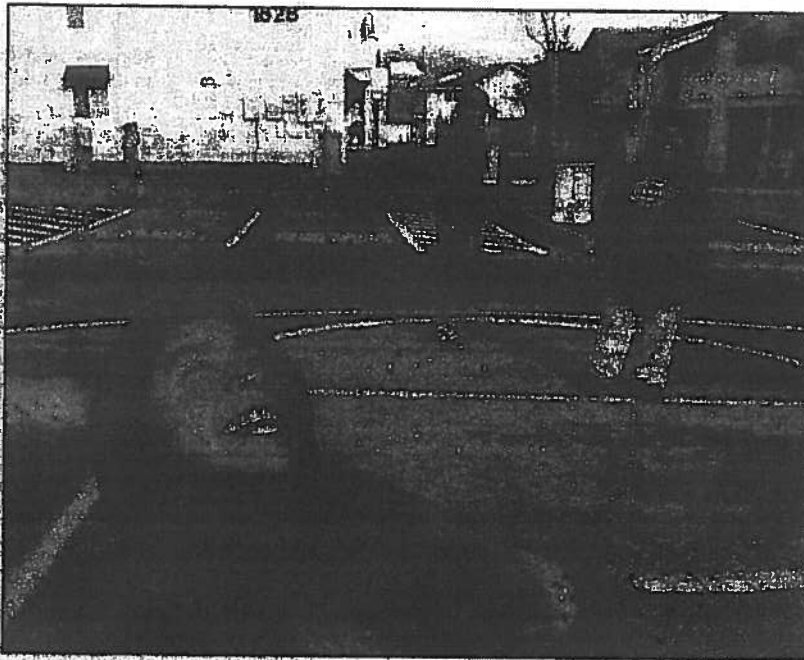
"Back in the 1960s they wouldn't come out to Kulshan Street without two or three other officers because it was so chaotic," Gerondale said. "Compare that to now and it's just a night and day difference."

There are so few police calls in the neighborhood that Gerondale now spends most of his time reaching out to the community and helping plan activities. Together, Gerondale and residents have started a community vegetable garden, hosted several community festivals and organized a block watch program.

Police statistics show today's Kulshan Creek neighborhood is safer than the city at large. There were 10.5 service calls per person in the neighborhood in 2007, whereas all of Mount Vernon had 0.89.

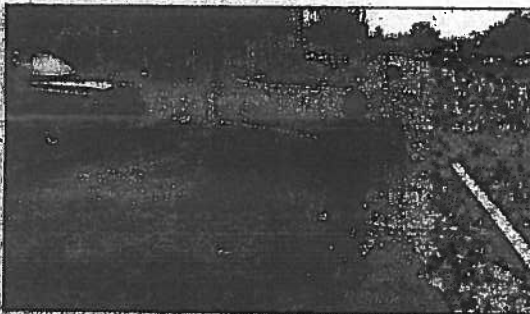
La Paloma is also different these days, the Housing Authority says. A few troublesome tenants were asked to leave when the authority took over. Remaining residents signed leases with clearly stated rules and expectations. The complex also underwent a physical makeover. Windows, refrigerators and stoves were replaced, and apartments were fumigated to eliminate insects.

Senior police officers have told Gerondale that La Paloma used to



Matt Wells / Skagit Valley Herald

Chuy Sandoval, 9, plays basketball Saturday with friends at the Summer Glen Apartments on North 26th Street in the Kulshan Creek neighborhood of northeastern Mount Vernon.



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Children ride bicycles down North 26th Street, the heart of the Kulshan Creek neighborhood, in this 2006 file photo. To the left is the Cascade West apartment complex.

be "extremely dangerous" and "the worst place to be in Mount Vernon." But now the complex is fairly quiet. The only sounds emanating from La Paloma earlier this week were the occasional laughter of a young child playing a lively basketball game.

Sonia Arellano had heard of La Paloma's reputation when she and her husband, Jose, decided to make their first home together there in 1992. But she figured the humble family could stay out of trouble. Today, the Arellanos have lived at La Paloma longer than any other residents.

Arellano recalls the drunken fights some of her neighbors used to have and how poorly maintained the buildings were. But today she appreciates the new flooring, heating system and concrete walkways that have been added to her affordable

rental complex.

"We live well here," said Arellano, who sat comfortably at her dining room table Sunday. Her husband sat across the table and smiled as their two children eagerly listened to their mother talk about the old days.

"We wouldn't even think of moving to another place," Arellano said in Spanish.

The stark difference between La Paloma today and a decade ago makes the Housing Authority believe a new name is in order. La Paloma residents have been invited to enter a contest by suggesting new names for the complex. The winning name will be announced April 10.

La Paloma isn't the only one to undergo a name change, however. After Kulshan Creek's largest, 238-unit apartment complex was sold in 1994, the new owner decided to

rename the complex. Out went the old Sunrise Estates, in came Cascade West Apartments. But the name change hasn't blocked potential renters from recalling the area's old reputation, said Cascade West Manager Max Moreno.

"People call and say 'Where (are) you located?'" Moreno said. But after telling callers North 26th Street, "people say 'Oh, that's where all the crime's at' and I had a lady say, 'Oh, that's where all the Mexicans (are) at' ... They would just hang up on me."

Moreno, who first came to Kulshan Creek in 1989 as a tenant and still lives there to this day, is saddened by those assumptions. Most residents are good people, he says.

And as the second generation of some families begin to live there, Moreno said he's seen community pride swell within Kulshan Creek. There are few temporary tenants without a sense of ownership for the area. Instead, Moreno said most are long-term residents with a real stake in the community's future.

But can a different name for La Paloma change outsiders' perceptions of Kulshan Creek? Moreno isn't sure, but he's hopeful.

"Maybe for them a name change would make a difference," Moreno said. "To turn a bad rep into a good rep, it takes hard work. But I think we can. As a community, we have to turn that image around."

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